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246

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PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
OF IRELAND

Thomas Leslie

First Missionary of
the
Presbyterian Church
in Ireland.

Sailed from Belfast, March 16th, 1835.

ONE hundred years ago the Rev. Thomas Leslie, "the first Christian missionary to the heathen from the Synod of Ulster," which was then the main branch of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, set out from Belfast to engage in missionary work among the negroes in Jamaica. Six years earlier the Rev. Hope Mastertown Waddell had sailed for the same field, but as he had never been in the ministry at home, and was educated, ordained and designated in Scotland, his departure did not touch the Church in Ireland as closely as did that of Mr. Leslie, who had been for four years a minister in charge of a congregation in Co. Antrim and was designated to his field of labour in Belfast.

Mr. Leslie was born in the parish of Derrynoose, Armagh, and was the youngest son of Mr. Samuel Leslie of Drumcanver. He was brought up in the congregation of First Keady, under the ministry of the Rev. Andrew Breakey, and received his preparatory education in an Academy at Ballybay, which was conducted by the Rev. James Morell, Presbyterian minister of that place. He pursued his studies in the Royal Belfast Academical Institution (1821-1825), from which he received the General Certificate in Arts, in the year 1825. He studied Theology for one year in Belfast, after which he completed his divinity course in Edinburgh. He was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Monaghan in 1829, and, on December 29th, 1830, he was ordained to the pastoral oversight of the congregation of Kilraughts, which had been vacant and divided for some time. In July, 1833, he married Eliza, daughter of the late John M'Kinstry, Esq., of Keady. He laboured in Kilraughts till the end of January, 1835, when he demitted his charge in order to become a missionary of the Scottish Missionary Society, whose deputies were accustomed, from 1824, to pay regular visits to Presbyterian congregations in Ireland. This Society originated in 1796, without the Church of Scotland, when the Assembly by a small majority rejected the proposal to establish a Foreign Mission.

Like many another Irish Presbyterian boy, Leslie was early dedicated to the service of God and to the Christian ministry by a pious mother. As he grew

up his own choice confirmed her decision to train him for the Lord. While minister of Kilraughts the necessities and claims of the heathen were strongly impressed on his mind, and for a long time he entertained the idea of devoting himself to missionary labours. When it was urged, there was enough to do at home, he said there were others who would fulfil his duties here; but none appeared willing to carry to the heathen the unsearchable riches of Christ.

He often put to himself the question, Why should not I go? And at length he felt it his duty to obey what he believed to be the call of heaven.

On February 18th, 1835, he was appointed a missionary and designated to work in Jamaica. The service, which was held in May Street Church, was conducted by the Rev. James Morgan, of Fisherwick Place. The Rev. Hope Master-town Waddell, who was home on furlough from Jamaica, preached; the Rev. Robert Park, of Ballymoney, offered the designation prayer, and the Rev. Dr. Henry Cooke, of May Street, gave the charge. On the evening of the same day a service was conducted in May Street by the Rev. J. A. Canning, of Downpatrick, and Mr. Leslie, who preached from the text, "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. xxviii. 19). In the course of his sermon, which was characterised as being "simple, judicious, sound, and seasonable,"

"he particularly exhorted ministers, probationers, and students, to consider the importance of the Saviour's injunction, and the imperative duty of fulfilling it. The motives he adduced were: 1, The love of Christ. 2, The command of Christ the Creator. 3, The miserable state of the heathen world. 4, The example of active worldly men. 5, The example of apostles and godly men. 6, The present facilities. 7, Christ's promise of success; and, lastly, the glorious reward (Daniel xii. 3). Christians might promote the missionary cause, first, by their holy lives; secondly, by their earnest prayers; and thirdly, by their liberal contributions."

Before his departure from Belfast, on the 16th of March, several presentations were made to him: one by the Juvenile

Missionary Association of Rosemary Street congregation, and another by the students of the Synod of Ulster in Belfast College. The students, who appear to have been deeply impressed by the appeal he made to them in the course of his sermon in May Street, gave him the works of Jonathan Edwards—"To testify their respect and esteem for his character, as a faithful minister of the Gospel, and their Christian sympathy and love for him, as the First Missionary of the Cross who has gone forth from that church, to proclaim to the destitute Heathen, the Unsearchable Riches of Christ."

The address which accompanied this presentation contained some eloquent passages:—"We rejoice, sir, that a minister of our Church has been exalted to the honourable station of a Missionary of the Cross to the Heathen World. Other Christian Churches in our land have been honoured hereby much sooner than the Synod of Ulster; but we are thankful that she now can joyfully exclaim, 'The Lord hath taken away my reproach.' May many of her sons follow your example, and tread in your footsteps. . . . Farewell, dear sir, the blue waters of the Atlantic will soon roll between us, but you shall not be forgotten. We will earnestly supplicate the omnipresent Jehovah to bless you and your family with His choicest blessings. In our Missionary Prayer-Meetings we will unite in fervent prayer for abundant blessings on your labours; and henceforth we will feel that we are connected by a closer tie to the heathen world. . . . May the God of all grace supply all your wants out of that fulness, which is treasured up in Christ Jesus. May He give you His Holy Spirit to guide you unto all truth—to direct you in that path to which He hath led you—to enable you to be faithful unto death. May He impart unto you the meekness and heavenly-mindedness of a Martyn, the zeal and faithfulness of a Brainerd, the wisdom and fortitude of a Swartz, and the diligence and extensive usefulness of the lamented Carey."

In thanking the students, Mr. Leslie expressed the hope that he might not long be left the only missionary from the Synod of Ulster, and said that nothing could afford him greater pleasure than

the prospect of some of them joining the little band who were fighting the battle of the Lord among the heathen.

He indicated two ways by which they might help:—

“Either devote yourselves as Missionaries to the service of God among the heathen, or stand forth fearlessly and consistently as the advocates of Missions at home. . . . As to the first of these plans, I would ask you is it too much to expect that from your number I may live to see many engaged personally in this glorious work. You say, and truly, that it has long been a blot on the escutcheon of the Synod of Ulster, that her sons have lingered at home while the heathen were perishing for lack of knowledge. Come, then, to the missionary field, and thus blot out that stain which is deep on the character of a professedly Christian people, and believe me, you will thus contribute more, by your example, to keep alive a Missionary spirit among the members of the Church at home, than you could do by any means while remaining at home. . . . Of most of you, the probability is, that you shall be employed at home; and of you I would hope that whenever and wherever you are, the cause of Missions will find in you zealous and devoted advocates. Let not your advocacy, however, be the cold, formal, and didactic information—whatever you do in this matter, do it heartily, and rest assured you will never find the people under your care indifferent to your appeals.”

The Editor of the “Orthodox Presbyterian” stated that in going to Jamaica Mr. Leslie had broken new ground, being the first missionary to the heathen from the Synod of Ulster:—“He departs from us with a pure and elevated character—he goes with the prayers and sympathies of the Church—and the confident expectation is that, under the blessing of God, his services will be faithful; persevering, and successful.”

The poet of the Church, deeply stirred, celebrated the event in a dozen verses, of which the following are typical:—

“Arouse thee, our Zion; be girt in thy strength,
The voice of the Heathen hath reached thee at length;

The cry of the needy hath come from
afar,
And one of thy sons goeth forth to the
war.

He goeth in weakness, yet goeth in
power;
For his God will be strength in the
perilous hour—
The helper of Jacob will still be his stay,
When he dwells with the negro, in lands
far away.

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Thy way lieth far from our Isle of the
West;
But love of thy Saviour so burns in thy
breast,
That thy fathers, thy brethren, thy kins-
men, thy all,
Thou leav'st at the sound of humanity's
call.

My prayer goeth with thee, thou true-
hearted man—
I see thee all wearied, all wasted, and
wan,
Surrounded with sickness, enfeebl'd with
care,
Cast down, and in trouble, but not in
despair.

In the strength of the Lord—by the
power of His might—
With the armour of faith thou wilt 'fight
the good fight'—
And a crown of rejoicing will ever be
thine,
Where the saints as the stars thro'
eternity shine."

On the 19th March, 1835, Mr. Leslie, accompanied by his wife and Mrs. M'Kinstry, his mother-in-law, sailed from Greenock, and after a tedious voyage of nearly seven weeks they reached the port of Falmouth on the 3rd of May. He was at once appointed to the temporary oversight of the Scottish Church at Lucea. The services he conducted on the first Sunday "impressed all his hearers with a strong conviction of his extraordinary power, as a messenger of salvation. His address to the understanding was doubled in its effects, by the potent sway which he exercised over the heart." He found an open door for his ministry and great encouragement in it. In a letter to Dr. Cooke, of May Street congregation, he expressed the ardent hope that the

Synod would send out even one missionary of its own, and he forwarded a memorial on that subject to be presented to the Synod.

Mr. Leslie was not spared to labour for long in the fields that were so white unto the harvest. On the 31st July, his mother-in-law died, and on that very day he received a letter from home informing him of the death of his father. Soon afterwards he had an attack of fever, due, it was thought, to the unhealthy nature of his residence on the seaside among swamps, but as he had charge of two congregations, and "the extent of his labours did not allow him to take care of himself sufficiently early," he was unable to ward it off. He went away for a holiday, from which at first his health greatly benefited, but the fever returned, and after two days' illness he died, on Tuesday evening, August 18th. His funeral was the largest ever seen in the parish, and all classes of the community, black, brown, and white, seemed "to vie in their eulogiums of him and the expressions of their sorrow for his loss." He left behind him a widow and one child. Mrs. Leslie at first thought of returning to Ireland, but she saw such a want of teachers and such a field of labour in Jamaica that she decided to remain there and "follow that course of duty" to which she and her husband had devoted themselves.

When the news of Mr. Leslie's early death reached Ireland there was unmingled sorrow among the friends of the struggling and severely tried missionary cause. The Rev. Andrew Breakey, of Killyleagh, formerly minister of First Keady, an intimate friend of Mr. Leslie, preached a memorial sermon in which he paid a worthy tribute to the departed and encouraged the disappointed friends of the cause. He said:—

"He who calls one missionary out of the field, will call others into it. . . . He can make the death of a missionary convert more than his life. . . . Why should the Church be discouraged? . . . Our fathers, where are they? The prophets did not live for ever. But Jesus is the same, yesterday, to-day, for ever. . . . Were not our hearts cold, lifeless, faithless, there would be no discouragement at all. The falling of thousands in battle never

prevents others from enlisting; the wreck of a ship, others from putting to sea. When Africa became the grave of so many travellers, others were not deterred from pressing on, and hazarding life for the solution of a geographical problem. And shall the death of a missionary deter our Church from sending forth the messengers of Salvation?"

The Rev. James Morgan also preached a sermon in which he declared that the death of Leslie might be regarded as a judgment on the unfaithfulness of the Church from which he went out. That Church, planted in the land for upwards of two hundred years, had never furnished one missionary before. . . . "How must its great King and Head regard such a state of things?" He hoped that by Leslie's death the zeal of the Church might be promoted and its labours stimulated. "Let us ask, what are we willing to bear for the sake of Christ? A righteous man has died in the missionary field; let us consider what this demands of us and lay it to heart." The voice of the Presbyterian poet was not silent, on such an occasion, and he wrote by way of exhortation:—

"And you who minister at home,
Go fill your brother's place,
And cause the negro to rejoice
In Jesus and His grace.

Go and the songs of Zion raise,
Beneath the palm-trees' shade;
Go—the glad tidings to proclaim,
And trust the Spirit's aid.

A voice beseeching calls you hence,
A cry speaks from the grave—
'O come, the fields I left are ripe,
Come, quickly—come to save,'"

Thinking of the sacrifice that Thomas Leslie made, some cold, calculating person might say: "Why this waste?" It is not for us to say how highly such an offering was valued by Him to Whom it was made; but looking back a hundred years we can see that it effected much good in our Church, and helped to prepare for the great act that was consummated on July 10th, 1840, when the first missionaries of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland were appointed and designated by the General Assembly to India.

R. H. B.